

New patrols for downtown parks? - "Renaissance" recommendations Safety, maintenance among the concerns addressed by panel

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Many people don't know they exist, much less spend time in them.

In the daytime, they get passed by. In the evenings, they become ghost towns. Some are gathering places for transients. Others sit vacant.

That appraisal of downtown Seattle parks comes courtesy of a mayoral committee assigned the task of changing that picture. Starting with a premise that the two dozen parks and public spaces are underused and uninviting, with most unsafe and unclean, the task force this week laid out recommendations for a fix.

They include:

- Hire a uniformed but unarmed security patrol to enforce park rules and laws, and issue citations for violations.
- Create a separate division within the Department of Parks and Recreation to manage downtown parks.
- Have an outside entity coordinate events and programs.
- Devise a plan to finance repairs and maintenance, with a levy as one option.
- Put up fencing around some parks to deter late-night crime.

"We don't have as much green space in our downtown as other cities do, so that means we have to make excellent use of what we've got," said Kate Joncas, task force co-chairwoman and Downtown Seattle Association president.

The recommendations cover 10 large city-owned parks — including Myrtle Edwards, Victor Steinbrueck, Freeway and Occidental Square — as well as seven smaller parks and playgrounds, and seven plazas and squares.

"Recurring problems with vandalism, littering, and illegal activities have made some parks less than inviting to the people who work and live downtown," Mayor Greg Nickels wrote when he appointed the task force in 2004.

"My Downtown Parks Initiative is an effort to meet this challenge head-on and to 'reclaim' downtown parks for everyone through physical improvements and active programming."

The task-force agenda, dubbed "Downtown Parks Renaissance," now goes to the public for comment, with an open house and two hearings scheduled for later this month. Some recommendations would need City Council approval.

Joncas said the security patrol, called "Park Rangers," would have more policing power than "safety ambassadors" who now cruise downtown streets on foot and on bicycle, giving information to befuddled tourists and providing a second set of eyes for police. A tax on downtown property owners pays for the ambassadors, while the city is being asked to fund Park Rangers.

"Park Rangers would not just provide enforcement, but also a presence in the parks to make people feel more safe," she said.

Concern for homeless

Councilman Peter Steinbrueck said he wants to make sure an emphasis on park security would not translate into harassment of transients who legally use the parks.

"People need to feel safe and secure in our public spaces, but if the approach is to sweep the homeless out, that's unacceptable," he said. "They have as much a right to be there as anyone else, as long as they are not violating any laws."

The Rev. Rick Reynolds, executive director of Operation Nightwatch, a ministry serving homeless and poor people, also said illegal activities in parks should be policed, but that commissioned officers are better suited to do that job than a civilian security force.

"My concern is whether the level of professionalism and training is going to be commensurate with the training police officers receive," he said. "I have witnessed private-duty security people, acting on behalf of property owners, doing things to move people out of doorways that the police would never do."

Reynolds said enforcement must be carried out equitably.

"If a couple is drinking chablis on a nice tablecloth spread over a picnic table, would they be dealt with the same as someone drinking out of a paper bag?" he asked.

Police spokeswoman Debra Brown said department officials had not yet read the task-force report and had no comment about the possibility of the city hiring Park Rangers. "We believe the parks are currently safe," she said.

Steinbrueck said downtown parks are perceived as dominated by homeless people, particularly at night and on weekends, because of the "lack of residential density downtown to support the park system we have today. Until a lot more people are living downtown, we are always going to be seeing the faces of the homeless in our public spaces."

Both Steinbrueck and Reynolds said homeless people use the parks because they have nowhere else to go.

"I don't think this set of recommendations says anything about addressing homelessness as part of the solution, but it certainly ought to," Steinbrueck said.

More activities?

Councilman David Della, who chairs the committee overseeing parks, said he is intrigued by — but not yet sold on — the Park Rangers idea, as well as other recommendations.

"We really need to get on top of the safety and security issues in downtown parks, look at the maintenance and operational issues and have a clear plan on how to involve human-service agencies and people who live and work downtown when we are revitalizing these parks," he said.

Both Della and Steinbrueck said creating a separate bureaucracy to oversee downtown parks could be problematic. Della said he thinks all city parks should be managed together, and Steinbrueck said not all downtown parks face the same challenges.

Task force co-chairwoman Joncas said her Downtown Seattle Association, founded 48 years ago by business leaders and developers to be an advocate for the central business district, would be interested in coordinating lunchtime concerts and other events for downtown parks.

"The parks are not enlivened enough," she said. "There are community events that would come downtown if we provided the resources to help them do that."

The report says downtown parks need repairs and upgrades, and that funding could come from various sources, including private investment or a parks levy. Della said the council has discussed but not decided whether a levy is necessary.

Steinbrueck said he opposes the recommendation to install fencing around some parks as a way to discourage illegal activity after dark.

"Parks are public spaces and should not be seen as exclusive enclaves," he said.

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Downtown

Parks Renaissance Task Force

Open house

See renovation plans, review recommendations and meet task-force members

Tuesday

4:30 to 6:30 p.m.

Seattle City Hall

Bertha Knight Landes Room

600 Fourth Ave.

Public meetings

Give comments on task-force recommendations

Jan. 18

6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

Seattle Parks and Recreation Administration Building

Park Board Room

100 Dexter Ave. N.

Jan. 27

11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Seattle City Hall

Boards & Commissions Room L280

600 Fourth Ave.

Source: Seattle Parks and Recreation

Information

Executive summary and full report: www.seattle.gov/parks/projects/downtown.asp

- Caption: photo, mapBetty Udesen / The Seattle Times : A rainy day suits Paul Kent just fine for bringing his fluegelhorn music outside to Victor Steinbrueck Park in downtown Seattle. The 51-year-old technical writer routinely devotes his lunch break to sharing his music along the waterfront.Betty Udesen / The Seattle Times : A task force has made several recommendations to upgrade and improve security at several downtown Seattle parks. This bench is at Victor Steinbrueck Park near Pike Place Market.The Seattle Times : Downtown parks system (GST10MHRV)

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